



## Enlightening the Cave: Gollum's Cave as a Threshold between Worlds in J.R.R. Tolkien's "Riddles in the Dark"

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**Abstract:** This article presents a parallel reading of the chapter "Riddles in the Dark" from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and Plato's Allegory of the Cave that appears in *The Republic*. Plato's metaphysical and epistemological views, known as the theory of forms, provide the theoretical foundation for the analysis in which the literal and figurative meanings of the cave motif are of primary interest. The Allegory of the Cave will be examined alongside the Analogy of the Sun in a manner that takes into account both their literal and analogous aspects, and *The Republic* will be seen not only as a theoretical work of philosophy but as an eloquent literary dialogue as well. The analysis focuses on the characters of Gollum and Bilbo and considers the moments of entering and leaving the subterranean cave as a transition between different metaphysical and epistemic positions. This article is centred around the cave-thematic, but also takes into account the motifs of light, seeing, and blindness that are very common in Tolkien's fiction: the preliminary assumption is that light and darkness have great epistemic value in Tolkien's fiction not only symbolically but literally, and Plato's Analogy of the Sun will be used to illustrate and justify this reading. The questions pondered in this article rise from the overall problems of the metaphysical structure of Tolkien's fantasy universe as well as its epistemic laws as represented by the symbol of the cave.

**Keywords:** Literature and philosophy; theory of forms; knowledge in fiction; Plato; J.R.R. Tolkien

### Introduction

There are strange things living in the pools and lakes in the hearts of mountains: fish whose fathers swam in, goodness only knows how many years ago, and never swam out again, while their eyes grew bigger and bigger and bigger from trying to see in the blackness; also there are other things more slimy than fish.

Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, pp. 62–63

In this blackness that so distresses Bilbo Baggins as he is separated from his companions deep in the tunnels of the Misty Mountains lives another creature with large, gleaming eyes well accustomed to life without sunlight. Gollum, who is said to be “as dark as darkness, except for two big round pale eyes in his thin face” (Tolkien, *Hobbit* 63), has dwelt for years in solitude by a subterranean lake until suddenly joined by Bilbo, the protagonist of J.R.R. Tolkien’s novel *The Hobbit or There and Back Again*, first published in 1937. Bilbo, who is recruited on a quest with 13 dwarves and Gandalf the wizard, gets lost in the mountains after his company is ambushed by goblins. Wandering in the dark, he comes across Gollum and unwillingly gambles for his own life in a game of riddles with him. Their encounter sets in motion a series of events that is significant not only to the future of Middle-earth but to the characters themselves.

This article examines the literal and symbolical meanings of Gollum’s cave with respect to Plato’s theory of Forms, and his famous Allegory of the Cave in particular. Gollum’s cave can be interpreted as a symbol that represents the twofold nature of Tolkien’s fictional universe: it consists of the abstract world of ideas and the physical world of perception, with the division between them influencing the entire universe both metaphysically and epistemically. Alongside the cave, the recurrent motif of light has an important role in the analysis: in Plato’s philosophy sunlight holds great epistemic significance, and this also can be said to apply to Tolkien’s fictional universe. The Allegory of the Cave and the Analogy of the Sun are closely connected in Plato’s theory, and this paper also brings them together: the workings of the cave are centred around the motif of light and the tensions between the sun, shadows, and darkness – the world that *is* and the world that *seems*. The following analysis focuses mainly on two significant chapters: the aforementioned “Riddles in the Dark” from *The Hobbit* and “The Shadow of the Past” from *The Lord of the Rings*. Including the latter in the analysis is required because in this chapter Gandalf sheds light on important details that received less attention in *The Hobbit*, including Gollum’s personal history and his decision to live underground: the role of the cave is further explained in this chapter, permitting a deeper analysis.

Theoretically, this article draws mostly from Plato’s philosophy, particularly his view on epistemology and the role of sunlight. The theoretical constructions later known as the theory of forms have been formulated by scholars based on Plato’s dialogues, including *The Republic*, in which the Allegory of the Cave and Analogy of the Sun are presented. My reading of Gollum’s cave and its symbolical significance is in many ways parallel to Plato’s allegories; however, I also intend to find deeper structural and thematic connections that are more fundamental than the literal, mostly superficial similarities. Since the theories have largely been constructed by later scholars and the traditions of interpretation concerning Plato’s philosophy are many and multi-faceted, for the purposes of this article, I have chosen to focus on fairly canonical and generally accepted notions. The motif of light in Tolkien’s legendarium, on the other hand, has been thoroughly discussed by the well-known Tolkien scholar Verlyn Flieger in her book *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien’s World*. Her analyses have significantly shaped the approach of this article.

My approach is to read the two chapters by Tolkien side by side with the Allegory of the Cave and the Analogy of the Sun; in other words, I approach *The Republic* not only as a theoretical work of philosophy but also as a literary dialogue. When such perspective is adopted, the problematic – and undeniably long – relationship between literature and philosophy needs to be acknowledged. Jukka

Mikkonen, for instance, has studied this connection in his dissertation *Philosophy through Literature: The Cognitive Value of Philosophical Fiction*. According to Mikkonen, the traditions of the two branches often overlap: while philosophical theories sometimes receive their expression in the form of literary writing (including Plato's dialogues, in spite of his own sceptical attitude towards art and literature expressed in *The Republic*; see p. 673 [600c, 610a–b]), works of literature and fiction can entertain philosophical issues (14). In this article *The Republic* is primarily used as the foundation of the theoretical framework, but the analysis of the two caves – Gollum's and Plato's – includes instances where quotations from *The Republic* are treated as pieces of literary art.

Because of the chosen literary-philosophical approach, the literal and allegorical perspectives become intertwined: I pay attention to the literal aspects of Plato's cave while the actual, physical cave under the Misty Mountains is revealed to hold great symbolic significance with respect to knowledge and the structural hierarchy of the world, including Gollum's twisted notion of the surrounding reality. The literary nature of Plato's dialogues also requires cautious interpretations for another reason: it is far from clear to whom the philosophical views can be attributed in the end, since it is usually Plato's version of Socrates who delivers the crucial notions; it is therefore uncertain whether the views are genuinely congruent with Plato's own opinions. For clarity's sake I have decided to refer to the theories as Plato's, although the character of Socrates occasionally surfaces.

The first section of the analysis begins with an account of the two caves, the allegorical and the literal, then presents a more thorough examination of their epistemological and metaphysical characteristics. In particular, anamnesis, Plato's theory of learning as a process of recalling forgotten ideas is a matter of interest: my assumption is that the cave deprives the mind of things with which it was once familiar, and that this is precisely and quite literally what happens to Gollum. Gollum's character is also at the centre of the analysis in the second section, which looks more closely at the sense of sight and the two-way blindness caused either by entering the cave or leaving it behind. In this section Gollum's aversion to light and the outside world is of particular interest, and the Analogy of the Sun alongside the recurring motif of light in Tolkien's fiction becomes more prominent.

## Turning Away from the Idea: The Cave and Gollum's Chosen Imprisonment

In Plato's philosophy, metaphysics and epistemology are tightly intertwined, and the metaphysical structure of the world determines not only what is genuine and what is not, but also what knowledge concerns and what it does not. According to theory of forms, which is one of the classical solutions to the problem of universals, the world consists of two levels: the everyday perceptible world and forms or ideas. Of these two Plato holds the world of forms primary and true: it is aspatial and atemporal, permanent and unchanging, whereas the physical world of perception is uncertain and unreliable. The forms are substantial and represent the most accurate reality. The physical world, on the other hand, is a mere shadow of the higher ideas, their imperfect copy. Perceptible objects are subject to change and circumstances, but the forms they mimic are not: the forms contain the essence of every particular object, the very core without which they would not be the exact thing they are (Kraut).

Plato uses the Allegory of the Cave and the Analogy of the Sun to illustrate the problems of perception and the different levels of reality. In the Allegory of the Cave a group of prisoners is kept chained in a cave, never getting to know the outside world. The only things they see are shadows on the walls cast by a fire, and to them these shadows appear to be the only reality, things they name and believe in. The prisoners are indeed reluctant to face the world outside due to its strangeness and alien nature. Should one of them be released and led to the world outside, they would discover the truer reality and finally the sun that for Plato represents the highest of ideas, but they would be dazzled by its brilliance and unable to look at it. Once they return to the cave, after they have become used to the sudden brightness of Idea, the darkness makes them blind, just as the sun did outside, making them seem ridiculous in the eyes of those who never perceived the truer world outside (469–75 [514a–517a]). The Analogy of the Sun is presented when Glaucon, the interlocutor of Socrates, asks him about the definition of Good, a question that Socrates is hesitant to answer (455 [506d–e]). The sun has great epistemic significance in Plato’s philosophy: it has the power to illuminate objects and to reveal them in their true form and nature. Metaphorically it is the sun, the Form of the Good or “the child of goodness”, as it is called in the Analogy, that makes knowledge possible by illuminating reality with truth. Because knowledge does not concern the world of perception, truth and knowledge are to be striven for with mind rather than senses (460–61 [508c–e]).

Applying the theory of forms to Tolkien’s fiction is not a straightforward task given the multi-layered structure of the fictional universe of Arda, its creation, and its metaphysical hierarchy. The Platonic elements in Tolkien’s fiction, especially regarding creation and the layered nature of the universe, have been a matter of interest in several previous studies.<sup>1</sup> My approach in this article is based on the assumption that Tolkien’s fictional world consists of both the primary world of abstraction and that of physical objects. The first thing to mark is that when Plato’s notion of metaphysical hierarchy is applied to the fantasy universe, it necessarily follows that the world outside Gollum’s cave is secondary and less genuine as such – leaving the tunnels of the Misty Mountains does not mean entrance to the world of Forms but an entrance back to everyday reality. However, the cave works as a figurative illustration of the overall structure of the fictional world and the transitions between different levels, both epistemically and metaphysically.

I argue that even though all the characters in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* are involved with the world of perception and the physical reality of which Middle-earth is a part, the characters vary greatly. Gollum, as I intend to show, has turned his back on the reality to which he belongs, shunning sunlight and rejecting the chance to see the world as it truly is. This rejection, the clearest turning-point, takes place when Gollum seeks shelter under the Misty Mountains and lives voluntarily in the cave, turning his back on the sunlit world. The first – and extremely important – similarity between Plato’s cave and Gollum’s dwelling is that the inhabitants are not born there. In *The Republic* the character of Socrates explains that the prisoners have lived in a cave-like dwelling since childhood – not since birth (469 [514a]). This is a matter I will soon return to. The moment of transition between the above-ground and underground worlds assumes that Gollum is drawn to things deep and dark already by

<sup>1</sup> These include for instance Jyrki Korpua’s dissertation and Gergely Nagy’s article “Saving the Myths: The Re-creation of Mythology in Plato and Tolkien”. Korpua studies the metaphysical hierarchy of Tolkien’s world (see especially 45–71, 87–94), while Nagy focuses on the similarities between Plato’s and Tolkien’s use of myths.

nature, which means that his problematic relationship with the reality outside the cave had already begun before his self-chosen imprisonment:

The most inquisitive and curious-minded of that family was called Sméagol. He was interested in roots and beginnings; he dived into deep pools; he burrowed under trees and growing plants; he tunneled into green mounds; and he ceased to look up at the hill-tops, or the leaves on trees, or the flowers opening in the air: his head and his eyes were downward. (Tolkien, *LotR* 54)

All the 'great secrets' under the mountains had turned out to be just empty night: there was nothing more to find out, nothing worth doing, only nasty furtive eating and resentful remembering. He was altogether wretched. He hated the dark, and he hated light more: he hated everything, and the Ring most of all. (56)

The above two passages are both included in the account given by Gandalf in the chapter "The Shadow of the Past". In particular, the first paragraph creates a sharp juxtaposition between low and high, dark and bright. A moral estimation is also present: metaphorically the dark and low are seen as something negative, whereas the high and bright are considered good and worth pursuing. This, of course, is a common division; Korpua, for instance, has pointed out the tendency in Tolkien's work to associate light with good and shadows with bad (54). Gandalf's account reveals that Gollum has, literally and symbolically, turned his gaze to the ground, peering into the dark and eventually shunning light completely – and this quality is innate, not induced by the foul, corruptive power of the Ring or Gollum's life in the cave. Additionally, the descriptions of Gollum's movements emphasise the way he is drawn to the ground, the deep, and darkness rather than light and air: he crawls rather than walks, using both his hands and his feet to make his way. Taking all of this into account, Gollum can be said to be a creature fond of cool and dark places in which he can see and perceive others but remain safe from inquisitive eyes himself. The chance to hide, to see and not be seen, is something the Ring enables by making its bearer invisible. A similar sense of safety is also provided by the cave under the Misty Mountains where Gollum has dwelt for centuries: despite the complete darkness, Gollum himself can see, whereas intruders cannot. The sense of sight and the motif of blindness become essential in the next section, but for now the analysis focuses on the role of the cave as an epistemic prison that severs connection with the outside world, obscures perception, and erases memory.

Interestingly, Gollum's decision to abandon the aboveground world is triggered by reflections and indirect contact with the sun:

One day it was very hot, and as he was bending over a pool, he felt a burning on the back of his head, and a dazzling light from the water pained his wet eyes. He wondered at it, for he had almost forgotten about the Sun. Then for the last time he looked up and shook his fist at her. (Tolkien, *LotR* 55)

Plato's allegory is rich with shadows and reflections, and they make regular appearances in the descriptions of Gollum's worldview. Shadows and echoes form the only known world to the prisoners of Plato's cave, and should they be released and led outside, shadows and reflections of things would be all they could see at first because of the unbearable brightness. For Gollum as well, the transition between the different levels happens gradually, but the direction is the opposite: living in the aboveground world, he begins to resent the reality and seek the shadows, and is finally appalled by

the mere reflection of the sun. The cave offers that which Gollum sought already before descending underground where he dwelt until Bilbo's unintended visit and the loss of the One Ring.

The wandering Bilbo breaks Gollum's isolation in an exchange of riddles. Of these one in particular is fascinating in the context of the motif of light and the slowly breaking walls of Gollum's epistemic prison. Gollum had spent centuries in the cave as his memories of the world as it truly is were wiped away. The process of recollection is most essential, and Plato's theory of anamnesis becomes relevant once Bilbo asks one of his riddles. The cave isolates Gollum quite literally from light and, surprisingly, reunion happens by the sun coming into the cave, not by Gollum leaving the tunnels behind:

An eye in a blue face  
Saw an eye in a green face.  
'That eye is like to this eye'  
Said the first eye,  
'But in low place,  
Not in high place.'

'Ss, ss, ss,' said Gollum. He had been underground a long long time, and was forgetting this sort of thing. But just as Bilbo was beginning to hope that the wretch would not be able to answer, Gollum brought up memories of ages and ages and ages before. (Tolkien, *Hobbit* 65)

The answer to Bilbo's riddle is, as Gollum successfully guesses, the sun on daisies. Bilbo's presence reminds Gollum of his earlier years, his life with his family before the Ring – indeed, the game of riddles itself is something he has secretly missed (64–65). In addition to all this, Bilbo brings with him a memory of the sun that Gollum has denied for centuries. It is not meaningless that light enters Gollum's life verbally rather than directly as something perceptible. It could even be said that at first it is only the long-forgotten idea of light with which Gollum again gets in touch: with Bilbo's riddle the name and the memory of the sun return to Gollum, unwelcome as they are. The cave is no longer without sun, the enemy Gollum shunned in the first place – its idea has returned and, if the Analogy of the Sun is brought into the analysis, made everything else clearer with it, enabling access to knowledge, truth, and genuine reality. For Plato, the sun represents the Form of the Good without which all knowledge is inaccessible. The riddle thus ignites the process of recollection, and Gollum's self-wrought cage of epistemic isolation begins to fail.

I claim that relative to Gollum's epistemic position represented by the cave it is the process of recollection that is of highest importance. According to Plato's concept of anamnesis, gaining knowledge and learning are, in fact, rediscovering something that has merely been forgotten, because knowledge is innate to the immortal soul. Plato, basing his theory on the process of rebirth, claims that the ideas innate to the soul are wiped away in the moment of reincarnation and must be learned again (Kraut). Anamnesis is something that is presupposed in the epistemic whole of Arda, but it seldom surfaces. Anamnesis – although it is naturally never called so in Tolkien's fiction – is discussed most thoroughly (and, ironically enough, in the form of a dialogue between two characters) in a section named "Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth" from the posthumously published *Morgoth's Ring*, and I interpret Gollum's recollection as one of its implied instances. Bluntly stated, Gollum has foresaken the

knowledge he once possessed when descending into the cave, and has wilfully remained ignorant until Bilbo's riddle evokes his memories: the name of the sun, the metaphorical Form of the Good, reopens access to knowledge for him even before he leaves the darkness of his cave. The process of recalling initiated by Bilbo's riddle cannot be undone: the idea of the sun has returned to Gollum, if only on a verbal level, and that which was intentionally forgotten and abandoned is creeping back. In fact, a reunion that happens on the level of thought could be seen as the most valuable one, since for Plato, as noted above, true knowledge should be pursued through mind, not perception. I read this reunion as a chance for Gollum to take a step closer to the world of Forms, to the truer (albeit not quite genuine) reality. Gollum, however, refuses to take this opportunity to reconnect with the world: it is his obsession with the Ring that eventually leads him out of the cave, but his hatred of light and, according to my interpretation, of reality in its truest state, remains. Thus the process of anamnesis begins but is disrupted by Gollum himself.

## **The Cave as a Threshold of Seeing: Transitions Between the Two Worlds**

This article began with a quotation in which the impregnable darkness and the sense of sight are brought to the fore. Seeing and blindness are significant motifs that continue to surface in the descriptions of Gollum's cave and the moments the characters spend there. Read in the context of Plato's epistemological views, the question of seeing must be approached metaphorically: Plato's philosophy is founded on the notion of physical reality as the secondary one, and therefore perception cannot provide genuine knowledge. In my reading the motifs of seeing and blindness do not refer to perceptual knowledge and the sensory world; rather, they work as illustrations of the characters' epistemic situation, especially transitions between the different levels of reality. This section continues the cave analysis but focuses more specifically on blindness that is induced either by light or by its absence.

While the Allegory of the Cave still forms the basis of the analysis, the Analogy of the Sun requires a more detailed examination. The absence of light is what makes Plato's Cave what it is after all: a place not of knowledge but of conjecture and illusion. Gollum's departure from the cave and his reactions to the outside world in particular bear great resemblance to Socrates's description of the released prisoner who sees the real world again, although the crucial difference is that in Gollum's case, as stated in the conclusion of the previous section, the process fails to become complete: he never readjusts to life outside the cave, and many things remain hateful to him until the end. In the deep dark of Gollum's cave, subterranean creatures struggle to see, and their eyes grow ever bigger and bigger. Seeing is, naturally and also physically, a matter of adjustment, and Gollum's eyes no longer have need of sunlight – quite the contrary, in fact. I will now give two descriptions of seeing and light, one uttered by Plato's Socrates, one written about Bilbo's poor state and confusion:

And suppose once more, that he is reluctantly dragged up a steep and rugged ascent, and held fast until he's forced into the presence of the sun himself, is he not likely to be pained and irritated? When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities (Plato 472 [515e–516a]).

When Bilbo opened his eyes, he wondered if he had; for it was just as dark as with them shut. No one was anywhere near him. Just imagine his fright! He could hear nothing, see nothing, and he could feel nothing except the stone of the floor (Tolkien, *Hobbit* 61).

When Bilbo regains consciousness at the beginning of “Riddles in the Dark” after being ambushed and attacked by goblins, what strikes him the most is the surrounding darkness. Bilbo is nearly helpless when he finds himself in the darkness of the cave – quite as helpless as Gollum once he returns to the world above. Plato’s Socrates says, “Any one who has common sense will remember that bewilderments of the eyes are of two kinds, and arise from two causes, either from coming out of the light or from going into the light, which is true of the mind’s eye, quite as much as of the bodily eye” (Plato 476–77 [518a]). Here the importance of the difference between having been born in the cave and entering the cave surfaces again: blindness (or, depending on the translation of Plato’s texts, sometimes referred to as “bewilderments of the eyes”, as above) occurs when descending into the cave but also when returning to the world outside, and it is the transition that matters. According to Plato, the shadows and the cave begin to seem false and unintelligible only after one has first seen the Ideas and their truth. The released prisoner has experienced enlightenment and understanding, but once back in the cave he is made the target of ridicule and his position is vulnerable (474–75 [516e–517a]).

The quotation from *The Republic* explains the situation of a released prisoner who is – not unlike Gollum – unable to see things properly in sunlight. In *The Lord of the Rings* Gollum is clearly uncomfortable with the sun, even afraid of it, as the text often mentions (see, for example, pages 636–37). As implied in the first paragraph of this article, Gollum’s large, lamp-like eyes are well used to seeing in the dark, and both daylight and moonlight disturb his perception. In the darkness of his cave, Gollum is superior: he has all the advantages of familiar surroundings and the ability to perceive things that are invisible to others. This, I argue, is the strongest sign of Gollum’s descent. When chasing all the “great secrets” under the mountains, trying to unearth roots and beginnings and delving deeper into the empty night, Gollum is moving further away from the world of Forms, from the Ideas and the truth. What he seeks could be referred to as false truth, and the transition into the truer world causes him great confusion, making him hostile and doubtful.

A reading of “Riddles in the Dark” side by side with the Allegory of the Cave reveals very literal similarities, even to the point where it may seem like a self-evident line of analysis to pursue. I argue, however, that the similarities are crucial and deserve to be pointed out: this kind of approach can also be defended based on Verlyn Flieger’s study on Tolkien. Flieger claims that in Tolkien’s fiction it is central to “confer literality on what would in the primary world [i.e. the real world] be called metaphor and then to illustrate the process by which the literal becomes metaphoric” (49). It should not therefore be presumed that the cave-thematic in all its literalness would automatically mean there is no need for deeper analysis. The role of the cave is epistemologically significant in Gollum’s case: there is no real perception in a cave, merely shadows, conjectures, and impressions. Nor is there real knowledge: it can be argued that Gollum’s thoughts gravitate towards images and knowledge of things that are somehow hollow and less real than those revealed by sunlight.

Regarding the problems of sight and perception, Michael Wodzak and Victoria Holtz Wodzak provide an interesting interpretation of invisibility in their article “Visibílium Ómnium et Invisibílium: Looking Out, On and In Tolkien’s World”. In



their analysis concerning Gollum, they point out that his gleaming eyes seem to emit light despite the complete darkness of the cave – the light must come from the eyes themselves, as there is no light available for them to reflect. The authors' interpretation is that the pale, greenish light in Gollum's eyes appears when he is most heavily affected by the Ring; that is, when evil is taking over. They note that extramissionary sight, or visual perception that is connected to beams of light coming from the eyes of the observer, is also demonstrated by dragons like Smaug (Wodzak and Wodzak 133–34, 136.) It is interesting that Gollum, whose eyes are so often described to be glowing, is appalled by elves for a seemingly similar reason: "Dwarves, Men, and Elves, terrible Elves with bright eyes" (Tolkien, *LotR* 630). Gollum refers to the bright-eyed elves more than once, and his comments are intended as negative ones.

Taking into account the Tolkien's tendency to associate light with goodness, Gollum's aversion becomes a complicated issue to analyse. Light very literally has the power to reveal things, and this is what Gollum is most afraid of: darkness keeps him hidden from the sight of others. An interesting question is whether that which Gollum avoids is perception itself or being perceived by others. The fear of becoming an object of perception is implied when Frodo and Sam are glad to see and feel the sun, and Gollum expresses his doubts most clearly: "You are not wise to be glad of the Yellow Face,' said Gollum. 'It shows you up '" (Tolkien, *LotR* 636–37). This interpretation receives support from Wodzak and Holtz Wodzak's analysis that Gollum's night-vision and his light-emitting eyes allow him to see in the dark when others are helpless – Bilbo, for example, does not see much besides Gollum's lamp-like eyes in the cave (Tolkien, *Hobbit* 64, 67, 70–71). Throughout Tolkien's fiction, the theme of seeing is heavily emphasised, and one of the clearest indications of this is the Eye of Sauron, the all-piercing omnipresence of evil. Given Gollum's fear of being exposed, being the object of perception, it is ironic that in deepest darkness it is his eyes that give him away: Bilbo sees them gleam even though everything else remains in shadows, and Gollum's superior night-eyes are actually what makes him vulnerable.

My parallel reading of "Riddles in the Dark" and the Allegory of the Cave highlights a problem that has not yet been addressed. In Plato's philosophy knowledge drawn from the world of Forms is largely associated with originality and permanence, and this is where my interpretations of light and knowledge are in discord with the theoretical frame. The problem is that in Tolkien's legendarium the sun is not in any way the original source of light: in fact, the sun and the moon appear relatively late in the chronology of Arda. The world is first illuminated by two high lamps that are cast down by Melkor, the main antagonist of *The Silmarillion*, after which they are followed by two shining trees, the silvery Telperion and golden Laurelin. These are corrupted by evil, and it is not until then that the sun and moon are created. Thus, they both have two sets of predecessors, lights more ancient than they (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 27–32, 108–114). A fascinating analysis of the motif of fractured light in Tolkien's legendarium has been provided by Verlyn Flieger whose book *Splintered Light* thoroughly examines the historical stages of lighting, its diminishing nature, and its relation to language and creation.

It would be erroneous in the context of Tolkien's work to hold on to a notion of the sun as the primal, purest source of light when it is actually a mere fragment of ancient light. Despite this significant detail, I stand behind the reading I have proposed: as remarked in the beginning of this article, to apply Platonic theories to a literary analysis is also to interpret Plato's literature as being rich in allegories, metaphors, and analogies. Therefore, an interpretation concerned with the epistemic

value of light should not in my opinion be shunned based on a formality, the conceptual difference between the sun and light in a general sense – the Analogy of the Sun is indeed an analogy after all, intended to explicate the Form of the Good.

## Conclusion

Gollum's cave in *The Hobbit* can be read as representative of the metaphysical and epistemic structure of Tolkien's fictional universe in general. The chapter "Riddles in the Dark" and the later accounts given by Gandalf create an image in which the established metaphysical and epistemic positions of the characters change, and the threshold of this transition is the cave. Plato's theory of forms, as expressed in the Allegory of the Cave and the Analogy of the Sun in particular, is the theoretical basis for this reading, and the literary nature of the dialogues is taken into account. The two caves, Plato's and Gollum's, are interpreted as epistemic cages in which knowledge and truth are inaccessible, as is reality in its truest state: for Plato, the cave represents the imperfect, changing world of perception, while the immaterial world of Forms is primary and true. The Platonic approach has been ventured before in Tolkien-studies, and the division between the two worlds can be found in the fantasy universe; not the least when examining the cave-thematic.

Alongside Forms and physical copies, light and dark, knowledge and conjecture, the greatest tension is between the literal and the allegorical or figurative. Plato's cave is clearly an allegory, but Gollum's cave, too, has remarkable metaphorical significance in spite of its literal nature. The theory of forms as theoretical source material crosses paths with "Riddles in the Dark" on levels that are both straightforward and ambiguous, and this paper places the two texts side by side instead of plainly applying philosophical tools to literary analysis. I hope to have sufficiently emphasised that the similarities between the two caves are deeper and more significant than the ones easily found on the literal level. The encounter between Bilbo and Gollum results in a literal act of stepping out of the cave, first verbally in an anamnesis-like process and then physically. To properly understand the epistemic rules of Tolkien's Arda and the role of the metaphorical cave and light in it one should ask if there are other, perhaps more subtle examples of such an event. Throughout Tolkien's fiction there are incidents where characters – Frodo, for instance – suddenly gain deeper insight into the world, perceiving something more clearly and poignantly. These occurrences, I argue, could be read as brief glimpses into the world of Forms, and more often than not they are enabled by divine light, as is the case in Elven-realm Lothlórien. This is a line of examination that could reveal much about the different possibilities of knowing and perceiving in Tolkien's world.

*Biography:* Katariina Kärkelä is a third year PhD student of Comparative Literature at the University of Tampere. Her research interests include philosophy of literature and the problematic relationship between knowledge and literature in particular. In her dissertation she analyses J.R.R. Tolkien's legendarium as an epistemic system aiming to find out the ways in which speculative fiction, fantasy in particular, pushes the natural boundaries of knowledge and broadens the justifiable use of the concept of knowledge in fiction. Theoretically, her main interests are Plato's literary philosophy, possible world theories, and medieval notions of dreams and visions as a means of acquiring knowledge.

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